

Elizabeth A. Whitaker
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs
Department of State
House Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Immigration: Responding to a Regional Crisis, July 26, 2006

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss the U.S. government's efforts with Mexico to address immigration issues.

The modern U.S.-Mexico relationship is marked by common values and interests, and that allows us to work in close cooperation on the many issues that affect the well-being of our citizens. Recent years have seen an unprecedented level of bilateral cooperation. We are partners on issues such as democracy, trade, counter-terrorism, law enforcement, the environment, energy, and transportation – some more challenging than others. We share a commitment to democracy, human rights, and free markets in the pursuit of security and prosperity for our people.

Certainly the cornerstone of this North American community was set twelve years ago in NAFTA. Since that agreement went into effect in 1994, trade between the United States and Mexico has almost quadrupled, and direct investment by the United States in Mexico and by Mexico in the United States has flourished. Mexico has passed Japan to become our second largest trading partner and export market, trailing only Canada. Today, value-added manufactured goods account for 90 percent of Mexico's exports, and there is substantial evidence that trade has played a very positive role in Mexico's development. For example, Mexican firms that export have created more than half of Mexico's new jobs since 1995, and those jobs pay on average 40 percent more than jobs in Mexican firms that do not export.

President Vicente Fox took office in Mexico making immigration reform in the United States his number one foreign policy priority. While for us, immigration is largely a domestic, not foreign policy issue, we have discussed the issue with the Mexican government on many occasions. Ultimately, we know that immigration from Mexico to the United States will not be permanently reduced until Mexico produces more good jobs, regains competitiveness, and improves education and infrastructure in its poorer states. Thus, our focus on reducing migration is linked in the long run to economic development and the rule of law.

Despite the enormous success of NAFTA, North America -- and Mexico in particular -- still face significant economic challenges. The Partnership for Prosperity (P4P) is a public/private sector initiative launched by Presidents Bush and Fox in September 2001 that focuses on developing those parts of Mexico that have benefited least from NAFTA. P4P is a pragmatic dialogue on Mexican development and U.S.-Mexico competitiveness. P4P projects focus existing resources primarily on Mexico's poor, migrant-producing states. Many smaller United States Government (USG) agencies would have had difficulty reaching out to their Mexican counterpart agencies without P4P, and since many do not have an international mandate, P4P gives them a structure within which to collaborate with other USG agencies and Mexican counterparts.

P4P has yielded significant successes. For example, a historic agreement in 2004 allowed the Overseas Private Investment Corporation for the first time to offer its full range of services in Mexico—well over \$800 million in financing for new projects so far. Peace Corps and two Mexican government entities signed agreements in 2003 and 2006 to allow volunteers to work in Mexico, where they are active in information technology, small business development, science, and technology.

Through P4P, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) work with their Mexican counterparts on rural development projects in Mexico. USDA has focused on sharing best practices on rural development with Mexicans and on bringing in buyer missions. USAID has undertaken a series of activities to increase Mexico's competitiveness, thereby increasing employment and income and decreasing the flow of immigrants. For example, the agency works to expand access for small entrepreneurs throughout the country to the financial services and market linkages that they need to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Also under P4P, a “Quadripartite Competitiveness Group” composed of U.S. and Mexican government and private sector representatives meets regularly to improve Mexico's business climate. The American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in Mexico strongly supports this forum, which gives them access to senior Mexican officials, establishes closer ties between the AmCham and the Mexican business community and gives them both an opportunity to weigh in jointly on issues. USAID is working with the Mexican Association of State Secretaries of Economic Development to help Mexican states and cities to improve their regulatory policies and practices.

Recognizing that a transparent and efficient justice system is needed for business competitiveness, USAID and the Department of State's International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Bureau (INL) support Mexican initiatives in state and federal jurisdictions to develop criminal justice reforms; train judges, prosecutors, and public defenders; and enhance the investigative and forensic capabilities of Mexican civil authorities and investigative police. We are gratified by the number of states that are requesting assistance for such reform, recognizing that it will provide swifter, more equitable justice for all, as well as a more level playing field for investors and businesspeople, thereby stimulating economic development.

Our ties with Mexico are increasingly framed by a trilateral relationship that includes Canada, as we all share a commitment to enhance the security, prosperity, and quality of life for our citizens. Created in March 2005, the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, or SPP, provides a framework for us to advance collaboration in areas as diverse as security, transportation, the environment, and public health. The Partnership has increased our institutional contacts to respond to our vision of a stronger, more secure, and more prosperous region. Indeed, SPP's goals are in many ways a broader version of much of P4P.

Presidents Bush and Fox and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper celebrated the SPP's first anniversary at a meeting in Cancun this past March. The leaders reviewed the progress made on the SPP agenda, and instructed their ministers to continue to move forward. The leaders also agreed on initiatives to strengthen competitiveness in North America (including the creation of a North American Competitiveness Council led by the private sector), to cooperate on managing the threat of avian and human pandemic influenza, to collaborate on energy security, to work toward smarter and more secure borders, and to develop a common approach to natural and manmade disasters.

Let me turn now to our border with Mexico. Facilitating the secure flow of goods and people across our shared border is one of the greatest challenges before us today. We have worked closely with Mexico to create institutions and infrastructure to enhance border security while making border transit easier and quicker for legitimate travelers and goods. The U.S.-Mexico Border Partnership, established by agreement of Presidents Bush and Fox in 2002, and now largely incorporated into the SPP, continues to pursue those goals.

That program has established trusted traveler programs for both passengers and cargo to allow us to focus on real threats at the border. SENTRI lanes (Secure Electronic Network for Rapid Travelers Inspection) at six ports of entry ensure expedited crossings for identified low-risk travelers. Two new SENTRI lanes were opened at border crossings into Calexico, California and El Paso, Texas in December 2005, and three more are scheduled to open this year.

A similar program of FAST lanes (Free and Secure Trade) for cargo shipments provides expedited crossings for cargo from participating companies who have demonstrated that their facilities are secure and their shipments low-risk. It is clear that with more than 1 million legal crossings every day on our southern border, more must be done to make those crossings swifter and safer, and we are committed to doing even more to achieve that goal.

Our border region has witnessed increased crime and violence, largely due to the activities of narco-trafficking organizations and increased enforcement on both sides of the border. The Mexican government has made a sincere effort to attack this problem on its side, for example, by sending in military and federal police forces to take temporary control over security and to purge and revamp local police forces in areas where the violence is acute, such as Nuevo Laredo. We are continually extending cross-border linkages among our law enforcement agencies along the border deep into the operational level to be able to mount coordinated responses to breaking security events, and there are many examples of ongoing cooperation with the Mexican government on border security.

Foremost among these are the Border Liaison Mechanism (BLM) meetings. These meetings are hosted by each of the Department of State's border posts and their Mexican diplomatic counterparts two to four times a year. They bring together U.S. and Mexican diplomatic, law enforcement, and other government personnel from all levels of government on both sides of the border to discuss issues requiring operational and policy coordination. These meetings allow our diplomats on the border, as well as U.S. law enforcement officers, to get to personally know their Mexican counterparts.

Operation Against Smugglers Initiative on Safety and Security (OASISS) also compliments the Customs and Border Protection strategic plan. OASISS is an alien smuggler prosecution program that was included as a priority under the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) between the United States and Mexico. The OASISS program will align itself with the broader Border Safety Initiative, as well as the various enforcement initiatives in the United States

focused on combating illegal cross border traffic. The Government of Mexico, specifically the Mexican Attorney General's Office (PGR), is a critical partner in this prosecutions program, which is aimed at increasing safety and reducing migrant deaths, while targeting alien smugglers and human traffickers operating in the immediate border region. OASISS focuses on high-risk areas where migrant lives are in danger due to smuggling organizations utilizing our shared border for their illicit criminal activity. OASISS is operational in California, Arizona, New Mexico and the El Paso area of Texas. Over 250 OASISS cases have been processed since the program began in August 2005.

In addition, for the past three years our government has collaborated with the Mexican government in the Interior Repatriation Program, which returned over 35,000 Mexican illegal immigrants apprehended in Arizona to their hometowns in the interior of Mexico. I know that my DHS colleague has further details on this program.

I would also mention the latest such collaboration between our two governments: On March 3, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and his Mexican counterpart signed the Action Plan to Combat Border Violence in Brownsville, Texas to establish operational protocols to govern coordinated, trans-border law enforcement action in response to violent security incidents along the border.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions you, or other members of the Subcommittee, may have. Thank you.